

Pueblo Skipper's 152-Minute Ordeal

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By *George C. Wilson*

Washington Post Staff Writer

CORONADO, Calif.—The legal fate of Cmdr. Lloyd M. Bucher of the USS Pueblo hangs on the way the Navy interprets three words in its regulations: "power to resist."

In two weeks of testimony before five admirals sitting here as a naval court of inquiry, Bucher has contended he did not have the power to resist the North Koreans who snatched his ship away on the high seas Jan. 23, 1968.

So far, his story of how he became the first skipper in more than 150 years to surrender his ship without firing a shot has held up well. But starting Monday, the court will hear from other members of the 83-man crew and there have been rumors, though only rumors, that some of Bucher's officers did not want to give up the Pueblo. Bucher is confident, however, that his crew will back him up by agreeing that there was no choice.

Navy regulation 0730 states: "The commanding officer shall not permit his command to be searched by any person representing a foreign state nor permit any of the personnel under his command to be removed from the command by such person so long as he has the power to resist."

"Cmdr. Bucher," his attorney, E. Miles Harvey, asked in court, "at the

time the North Koreans set foot on your ship, did you any longer have the power to resist?"

"No, I did not," Bucher replied.

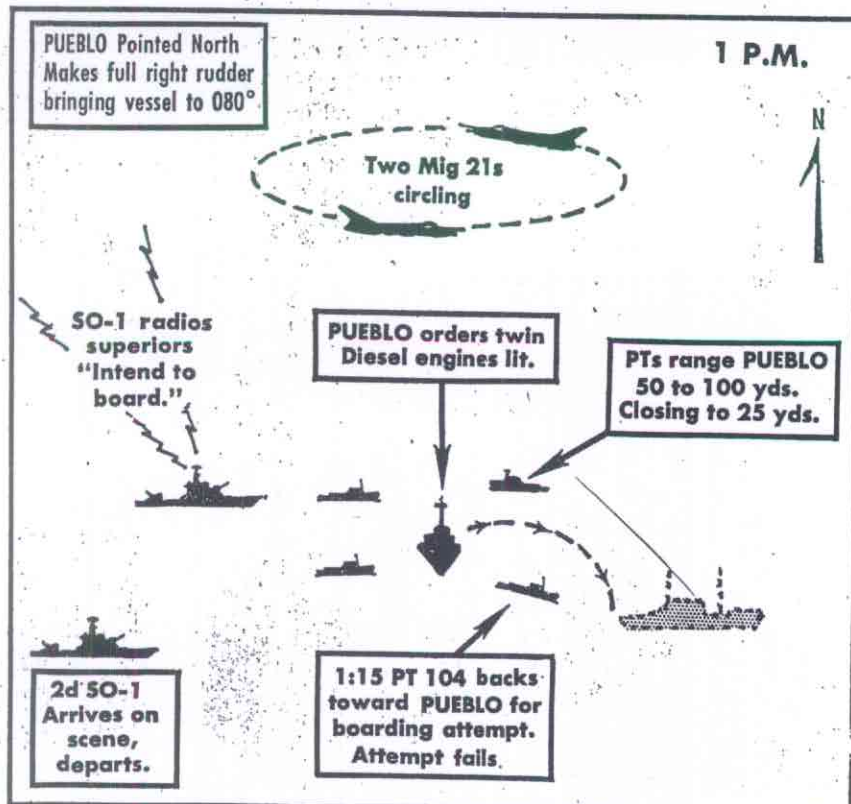
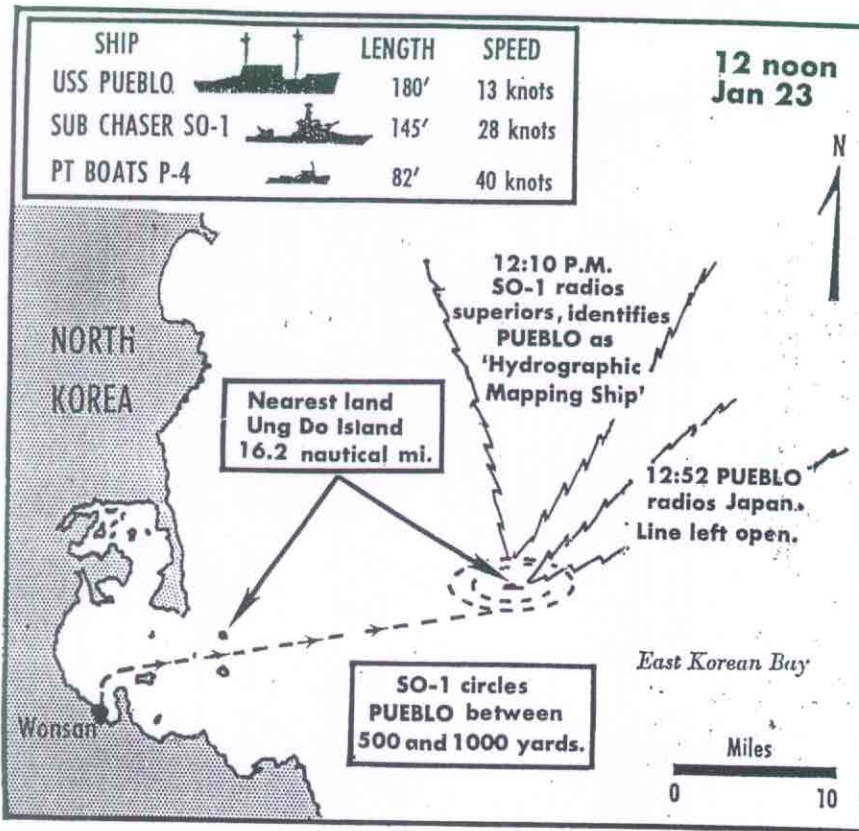
What follows is Bucher's own story of his 152-minute ordeal. The unattributed quotations are his.

“AT ABOUT 1200 [noon] or a few minutes thereafter, we sighted the SO-1,” a North Korean subchaser. QM 1/c Charles B. Law Jr. said that “we were between 15 and 18 miles from the nearest land, Ung Do Island. We were laying to, attempting to collect electronic intelligence.”

The subchaser circled the Pueblo at a range of 500 to 1000 yards, giving the spy ship a thorough scrutiny. The Pueblo was flying no American flag at the time. Its white numbers, GER-2, had not been painted out.

“After a minute of circling, the SO-1 asked, ‘What nationality?’ through the international code of signals flag hoist. My response to this signal was to hoist the U.S. flag, my ensign. And I noticed a great deal of activity aboard the SO-1.

“I expected that we might have this SO-1 for company for the remainder of the time that we would be in the area and that he would perform in



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the fashion of other ships that had tailed the Banner [the Pueblo's sister ship] on several of her missions . . . I did, however, plan to report the incidents, particularly in view of the fact that all of his guns were manned. But I figured that this was nothing more than harassment and something that was intended to intimidate me, and to intimidate the ship."

A Scientific Guise

TO DISGUISE the Pueblo's real purpose and also to assert its rights to the high seas, Bucher had raised the flags on his ship indicating that hydrographic operations were under way. He also ordered the oceanographer to conduct a Nansen cast: heaving over the side a string of bottles attached to a cable. The bottles are opened after the weighted line hits the bottom; they fill with water at various depths and take its temperature.

"The SO-1 hoisted the international code signal, 'Heave to or I will fire' . . . I was already lying dead in the water . . . I answered back, 'I'm in international waters.' This exchange took place on the SO-1's third circle of the Pueblo. The subchaser was flying pennant No. 35."

At 12:10 p.m., according to a radio message intercepted by U. S. intelligence, the North Korean subchaser radioed its superiors: "The name of the target is GER-2. I judge it to be a reconnaissance ship. It is American guys. It does not appear that there are weapons, and it is a hydrographic mapping ship." The subchaser had seen the hydrographic flags.

At 12:52, the Pueblo radioed its superiors at U. S. Naval Forces Japan

(headquartered at Yokosuka). Air Force Lt. Gen. George Brown, who looked into the Pueblo incident for the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told Congress last February that the Pueblo's 52-minute delay in reporting the "heave to" order "indicates that she wasn't particularly disturbed by this challenge." Bucher testified that he raised the precedence of his 12:52 p.m. message from "flash" to "critical," "which would permit the message to go immediately and straight to the White House in addition to all the addressees."

He had an open radio line to Japan at the while, in contrast to the previous day, when he said it took him 12 to 14 hours to make contact with his home command.

AT 1 P.M. Korean time, the sea-going game of chicken in international waters off Wonsan escalated. Three North Korean torpedo boats, armed with light machine guns as well as torpedoes, sped from the direction of Wonsan to join the subchaser harassing the Pueblo—still dead in the water. The torpedoes were still in their covers but the deck guns were manned. Also, Bucher said, two Korean fighter planes, which he believed were Mig-21s, circled overhead.

"The P-4s (torpedo boats) closed and stationed themselves around the ship at a range of between 50 and 100 yards, sometimes getting in as close as 25 yards . . . Attempting to man my 50-caliber machine guns and breaking out my 45s (pistols on board) would only have given them perhaps an excuse to

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turn from what might be glossed over into a full-blown incident."

Apparently unknown to Bucher at the time, U.S. intelligence had intercepted a 1:06 p.m. message from the subchaser to shore that she intended to board the Pueblo and tow her into Wonsan.

"I never considered that I would ever be attacked on this mission. It never occurred to me. I had read nothing, nothing in the many Banner reports, and I believe that there were ten of them. Nor had I received any briefings at any station along the way during my period as prospective commanding officer or after I was commanding officer—and the many briefings I received from people at CINPACFleet (Commander in Chief, Pacific Fleet) and in Japan—that would indicate that there was any danger of my ever coming under attack."

Koreans Converse

THE SUBCHASER sent another signal which Bucher translated as: "Follow in my wake. I have a pilot aboard." The subchaser and one of the PT boats conferred by semaphore and megaphone after this signal went up, apparently deciding how to force the Pueblo to follow them into Wonsan. PT boat No. 4 then backed toward the starboard bow area of the Pueblo with a boarding party on deck.

"I said on the bridge (when he saw the boarding party coming toward the Pueblo), I would be damned if they were going to get away with that, so I got under way and proceeded out to sea, and asked the navigator for the best course to open land. . . . He recommended 080. . . . As I was departing the area, I also hoisted a flag with the intention of confusing the SO-1: 'Thank you for your consideration. I am departing the area.' I should have filled my yardarm with flags that said absolutely nothing and let them fiddle around for some time. . . . I thought just sending them something would cool them off a little bit.

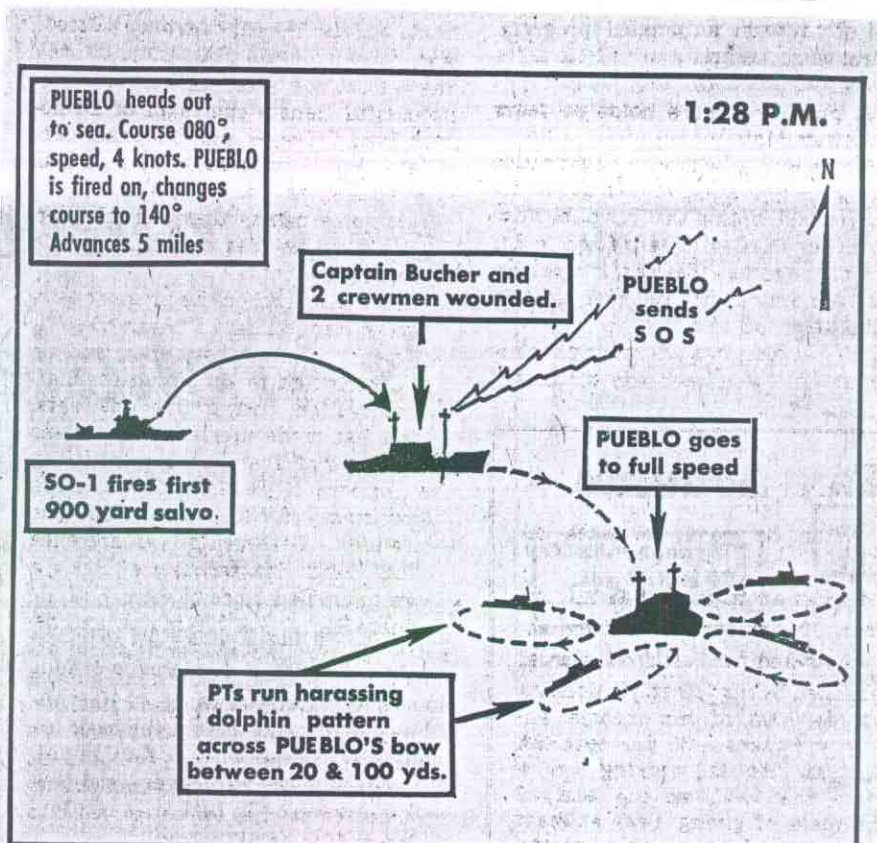
"I started off at one-third speed in order to leave the area in as dignified a way as I possibly could. I did not want to appear to be panicky. . . . I went at one-third speed in order to present a dignified departure from a rather tight situation."

By using right full rudder as he got under way, Bucher broke up the initial boarding attempt. A second subchaser came on the scene and then left, but the PT boats stayed with him. A fourth had come on the scene. They kept

close in on the Pueblo—one on each bow and one on each beam—as Bucher made a wide circle and headed out toward deep water.

Bucher had ordered his crew to prepare to destroy classified material aboard. "I didn't know but that I might be able to get away by running out to sea. I still had not been fired upon. . . . I did not consider that I had enough positive information as to what was going to happen eventually. . . . that I should order emergency destruction at that time."

"I was able to open the SO-1 to a



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range of something between 2000 and 3000 yards before she did anything else. I was, however, being constantly harassed by the P-4s. The one P-4 which was on my starboard quarter was the only P-4 to uncover a torpedo tube and train it in my direction. Otherwise, I was merely being held under the sights of the machine guns, which were deck mounted.

"The SO-1 was still lying back and was getting farther and farther behind me. About the time we had opened the range to him to approximately 3000 yards. . . . he opened on my port quarter in order apparently to gain a tactical advantage of being able to bring his guns to bear on at least

as much of my ship as possible . . .

"He was running at a speed of 20 to 25 knots in order to close me. As he commenced closing, he raised the signal again: 'Heave to or I will fire on you.' I ignored this signal and continued to run at full speed. . ."

'Request Help. SOS'

AT 1:27 P.M., as U.S. intelligence officers were to report later, the North Korean sub chaser ordered the four torpedo boats to get out of the way so she could fire at the fleeing Pueblo. At 1:28 p.m., the Pueblo radioed: "The North Koreans plan to open fire. . . . Initiating emergency destruction of classified equipment. Request help. SOS."

This was the message that Rear Adm. Frank L. Johnson's headquarters back in Japan was to find itself unable to respond to for lack of ships or planes in the right place.

"At a range of 1500 to 2000 yards, the SO-1 opened up on me and fired the first salvo. Each salvo contained between six and 14 individual shells."

Some of the PT boats—Bucher said he did not know how many—were firing away at the Pueblo at the same time with what he guessed were 30-

caliber machine guns. "I could see the dents being made as the machine guns raked the side of the ship, but very few of those penetrated."

One of the shells from the first salvo of 57-millimeter (Bucher judged they were that size) exploded near Bucher on the flying bridge. The fragments wounded Bucher, Signalman 1/c Wendell G. Leach and Communications Technician 3/c Steven J. Robin—all of whom were on the bridge.

The explosion knocked Bucher down. He had one painful fragment in his buttocks and seven more in his ankle area. But none of the men was put out of action by his wounds. Bucher said he got back up on his feet and ordered the destruction of the classified equipment aboard.

A Smaller Target

AFTER THE first salvo was fired, I continued to open the coast on a course of approximately 080, although I had come slightly to the right and was perhaps at that time on a course of about 100 degrees in an attempt to place the SO-1 more directly astern of me in order that I would present as small a target angle as possible. He continued to open to the east and, having much greater speed than I had, he was able to position himself once again out on my port quarter . . .

"After about the third salvo, it occurred to me that most of the firing was being directed toward my flying bridge . . . The SO-1 had closed by this time to a range of approximately 900 yards on my port quarter . . . He was continuing to close and therefore was firing at what I would consider a point-blank range."

Bucher said he therefore decided to go down to the pilot house by an exposed ladder on the starboard side. A

torpedo boat 40 yards off the starboard quarter spotted him and opened fire. The bullets missed him. Leach and Robin, rather than risk that fire, jumped down from the flying bridge to the pilot house level.

Problem of Destruction

BUCHER HAD ordered a modified general quarters—ordering all his men except those burning secret papers to stay off the decks and inside the ship where the machine gun bullets could not reach them. The torpedo boats had forced him away from his seaward course to a bearing more toward land of 140 degrees. He said this kept him from getting to 600-foot-deep water, the required depth for dumping classified equipment over the side.

He said he was worried about everybody getting killed or the ship being sunk in shallow water—alternatives which would have given the Koreans the secret equipment largely intact. He said he decided to stop his “high-speed” run to see if the firing would stop so his crew could concentrate on destroying secret equipment. He raised the flags protesting the firing and brought the Pueblo to a full stop under the guns of the sub chaser and four PT boats.

“We continued to destroy classified material” while the ship was stopped. The firing had stopped as well. “I decided at that time that if the destruction of classified material was progressing successfully, and depending upon what their next action would be, that I would surrender the ship.”

Pistols Over Side

AFTER LEAVING the pilot house to make sure no secret papers were there, and throwing his personal pistols over the side so the Koreans would not get them, Bucher said he went back up to the bridge. The sub chaser was lying to about 800 yards away from the Pueblo. It had hoisted the signal, “Follow me, I have a pilot aboard.” This was apparently about 1:40 p.m.

At 1:45 p.m., the Pueblo radioed shore that “we are being escorted into probable Wonsan.” Bucher said the fol-

lowed the sub chaser as slowly as possible to buy maximum time to destroy secret equipment. The sub chaser pulled about 3000 yards ahead of the Pueblo. The PT boats surrounded the Pueblo close in, motioning Bucher to speed up. He said he pretended not to understand and kept going at one-third speed.

Once again Bucher became worried about whether the classified material would be destroyed before the Pueblo

was tied up at Wonsan. He stopped the sub again to buy time. A torpedo boat radioed the Pueblo's all-stop to the sub chaser. It returned to a range of 2000 yards and opened fire again. One shell from this salvo hit Fireman Duane D. Hodges in the right hip, practically blowing his leg off and destroying much of his lower stomach region. Hodges died from his wounds.

“It became apparent to me at this time, and it was my considered opinion, that to continue to remain stopped as I was would only invite additional firing and would in all probability give us less of an opportunity to complete the destruction which was going on at the time. So I

ordered the ship ahead one-third . . . and we continued to follow the SO-1 in.”

This second stopping of the Pueblo was probably between 1:45 and 2:10 p.m., because it was in that interval that the ship radioed to Japan: “Have three wounded and one man with leg blown off. Have not used any weapons nor uncovered 50-caliber machine guns. Destroying all (deleted from public transcript) and as much electrical equipment as possible. How about some help? These guys mean business. Do not intend to offer any resistance.”

Bucher kept following the sub-chaser into Wonsan. He was ordered to stop at 2:32 p.m. It was apparently at this time that the North Koreans boarded the Pueblo. It was still in international waters, even outside the 12-mile limit claimed by North Korea—according to Navy officials. At 5 p.m., the Pueblo was still 6½ nautical miles outside Wonsan Harbor.

Bucher estimates that the North Koreans tied his ship up in Wonsan about 8:30 p.m. Destruction of classified materials had not been completed.

